

An overview of Newfoundland and Labrador's Intangible Cultural Heritage Strategy

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In 2006, the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador released its Provincial Cultural Strategy, Creative Newfoundland and Labrador. In it, the government outlined the need for a strategy to safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), and recommended to “over the longer term, create a public advisory committee with responsibility for the recognition and designation of provincial intangible cultural heritage.”¹

Starting in 2008, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL) established its ICH office. I shifted from my work with the foundation’s built heritage office into my new role as Intangible Cultural Heritage Development Officer, at that point, the first full-time provincial ICH officer in Canada. A large part of my role is to enact the province’s ICH Strategy. Written between 2006 and 2008, and adopted formally by HFNL in 2008, the vision of the strategy is to ensure that intangible cultural heritage is safeguarded as both a living heritage and as a source of contemporary creativity.

The strategy has four goals: documentation, the work of inventorying; celebration, where we honour our tradition-bearers; transmission, where we ensure that skills are passed from person to person, generation to generation, and community to community; and, cultural industry, where we build stronger communities using intangible cultural heritage as a tool.²

This is where work started, by developing projects and programs that addressed these four goals, the first being documentation. In 2008, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL) began to organize an ongoing province-wide ICH inventory, by establishing a central digital archive database and website in partnership with Memorial University’s Digital Archive Initiative (DAI). The ICH Inventory is arranged geographically by region and community, and thematically by subject, following the five UNESCO categories of ICH.

While we do take on the work of research and documentation, a huge part of our overall goal is giving communities the tools to undertake ethnographic documentation projects on their own. We provide communities advice in project planning, digital recording, oral history, interview

¹ Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. Creative Newfoundland and Labrador: The Blueprint for Development and Investment in Culture. St. John's, 2006.

² Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador. What Is Intangible Cultural Heritage? St. John's, 2008.

techniques, digitization of archival collections, metadata, cemetery conservation, tombstone rubbing, community Google mapping, whatever skills they are lacking to do local cultural documentation work themselves.

Documentation is not enough. Stories live when they are told. Traditions live when they are enacted, and re-enacted, at the community level. And so we have this second pillar in our strategy - celebration. As an organization charged with safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, we need to create opportunities to joyously celebrate the things we hold near and dear to our hearts, or which may be languishing in museum collections.

We need, in the words of the late S. Dillon Ripley, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution from 1964 to 1984, and founder of the American Folklife Festival, to “Take the objects out of their cases and make them sing.”

We started that work in 2008 with the development of the Mummers Festival, a celebration of Newfoundland and Labrador’s colourful tradition of disguised Christmas house visitation. Originally planned as a one-time event, it has turned into a large annual winter festival, now with its own board of directors. It grows larger and more popular every year, and has provided an amazing boost to the tradition itself.

Each year we pick a different cultural tradition to celebrate. In 2012, HFNL organized its annual folklife festival around the theme of “make and break” engines - a type of hardy vintage boat engine used on small fishing boats through the first half of the twentieth century. Changes in marine technology, boatbuilding styles, and the fishery led to their decline, but a number of enthusiasts continued to maintain, collect, restore, and use the old engines. Many rural people, not necessarily boat owners, have strong memories of the distinctive sound of the engines, a nostalgia-inducing tucka-tucka-tuck, once a common part of the aural landscape of outport Newfoundland.

The festival was organized following HFNL’s methodology for ICH safeguarding: ethnographic research was conducted; vintage repair manuals discovered, digitized and shared online; community experts and tradition bearers were mobilized, and a public flotilla of vintage boats with working engines was organized. Following the public event, a “parts swap” was organized, where boat engine enthusiasts were encouraged to bring pieces and parts for vintage engines to a central location. There, they traded and sold pieces, shared information, and made connections.

This is a good example of the third pillar of our strategy - transmission. We want to see traditions live. So where we can, we create opportunities to pass along traditional skills and knowledge. As one small example, we have been running workshops on pillow top making, a small wood frame type of weaving traditionally done by men in the lumberwoods in the early to mid 20th century. When we started this project a couple years ago, we found one tradition bearer who was still making pillow tops, Mrs Elizabeth Murphy from the Burin Peninsula. Folklorist Nicole Penney, whose grandfather, Raymond Russell, made these in the lumberwoods as a young man, has embraced the tradition.

Nicole Penney learned the skill from Elizabeth Murphy, and in turn has taught hundreds of seniors, university students and elementary schoolkids how to make this craft.

Over the next few years, as part of the centenary commemorations around the First World War, we will be starting our Grey Sock Project. It has been estimated that by the end of 1916, members of the Women's Patriotic Association of Newfoundland had produced some 62,685 pairs of socks, 8984 shirts, 6080 pairs of cuffs, 2012 handkerchiefs, and 1731 nightshirts. That is a historical fact, an instrument in a case. Our job is to take the instruments out of their cases and make them sing.

As currently envisioned, the Grey Sock Project has three components:

The first is to conduct archival and historical research on the First World War knitting of socks for soldiers at the Front, the work of the Women's Patriotic Association, and the digitization of historic knitting patterns, and to make that information available to the public through online collections and public presentations.

The second is to create opportunities to teach traditional skills in knitting, by establishing a regular Grey Sock Knitting League, where experienced knitters can gather to provide guidance to new knitters, and to provide opportunities for the transmission of traditional skills and knowledge. We will be partnering with the City of St. John's, The Rooms Provincial Museum, seniors organizations, and after school programs, developing introductory workshops and participatory knitting pods for seniors and children, girls and boys. This is about knitting, but it will hopefully also allow us to work on safeguarding associated heritage skills and industries, like spinning, carding, shearing, herding and animal husbandry, and the enhancement or promotion of distribution systems for traditional goods and locally-sourced raw materials.

American folklorist Millie Rahn has written that public folklore, the type of work we do, can be "a subtle method of social activism."³ The third component of the Grey Sock Project then is to oversee the knitting of socks which will then be collected centrally and distributed to worthwhile causes, such as charities dealing with low-income families, homelessness, or new Canadians, subverting a project that was historically about the war effort into a project with tangible social benefits.

The idea that safeguarding initiatives should work towards social justice or community sustainability is the fourth pillar of our ICH strategy. As an example of this, we worked with a number of communities a few years ago on an ICH project to identify a tradition under threat. They decided they wanted to work on community concerts - volunteer variety concerts that used to be held in parish halls, but which in today's age have fallen out of favour.

We worked with them to package five community concerts in three communities as a mini-festival. They all sold out, and along the way, increased attention to non-professional performers and tradition-bearers; community members were trained in ICH collection and cultural documentation; there was a revitalization of the concert tradition in those communities which has continued. All the money that was raised at these community concerts went back into the community, directed back into other local heritage and ICH projects.

³ M. Rahn, "Laying a Place at the Table: Creating Public Foodways Models from Scratch", *Journal of American Folklore* 119:471, 2006, p. 30-46.

So these are our four goals. They are not four individual goals; they are cumulative and overlapping. The best ICH projects address all four of them in some way.